

Testimony Prepared for the  
**Senate Human Services Committee**  
February 20, 2023  
Kim Jacobson, Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone Director

**RE: HB 1026: Study regarding the Implementation of the Recommendations from the 2018 North Dakota Behavioral Health Study conducted by the Human Services Research Institute and the 2022 Recommendations regarding Acute Psychiatric and Residential Care Needs provided by Renee Schulte Consulting, Inc.**

Chair Lee and members of the Senate Human Services Committee, my name is Kim Jacobson. I am the Director of the Agassiz Valley Human Service Zone with the service area of Traill and Steele Counties. In addition, I am the President of the North Dakota Human Service Zone Director Association. I am here today to provide testimony in support of HB 1026.

Human Service Zones provide services to the most vulnerable citizens of all ages in our communities. A significant portion of the mandated services we provide are to children and families, focusing on child safety, permanency and well-being. Human Service Zones are charged with providing services to children who have been victims of abuse, neglect, as well as those who are exhibiting disruptive behaviors such as truancy and running away.

As legal custodians for children in foster care, we are tasked to secure the most appropriate placement for foster youth and to support birth parents in securing services for themselves to resolve contributing causes of child abuse and neglect. Often those underlying contributing factors are related to substance use and untreated mental health conditions. The availability of a continuum of timely mental health services is critical to preserving families, reuniting families, and securing child safety and well-being.

In our highly rural state, accessing mental health services of any kind typically involves travel. This frequently means additional missed time from school for youth, work for parents and/or foster parents, along with increased costs to families. However, even in our larger communities, waiting lists for substance use, psychiatry and therapy services are common.

Frequently, the moment when those services are needed most, they are not readily available. In foster care settings, this routinely results in placement disruptions for children, emergency room visits, and possibly psychiatric hospitalizations—if there is a bed available. This compounds and exacerbates existing mental health needs and fails to meet the needs of the children we are entrusted to care for and protect.

A thorough and extensive effort to examine service gaps and recommendations identified in the 2018 and 2022 studies are essential to develop a strategic approach to ensure North Dakotans – including our children - have the right service available, at the right time, in the right location in order to meet their immediate and ongoing behavioral health needs.

Please accept my testimony in support of HB 1026. I stand for any questions from the committee.